

the indicator unit 48 changes, for example, to red and the microphone 49 of the "red" participant is disabled.

While the invention has been particularly shown and described  
5 with respect to preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention.

10 Having described the invention, what is claimed as new and secure by Letters Patent is:

#### CLAIMS

1. A server on a network, the server operable to:  
15 receive from a first participant via the network a formulation of a problem to be solved;  
receive from a plurality of other participants via the network suggested solutions to the problem; and  
20 distribute portions of an award to those participants who contribute suggested solutions to the problem.

2. A server according to claim 1, further operable to:

provide tools for use by the first participant for controlling the distribution of the award to the other participants.

5           3.    A server according to claim 1, wherein the distributions of the portions of the award are varied over the course of a development of the suggested solutions for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem.

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7. A server according to claim 2 further operable to:

store other tools for use by the other participants for controlling the distribution of the portions of the award among themselves.

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8. A server according to claim 1, wherein if the first participant has not awarded all of the portions of the award to the other participants within a predetermined time, at least some of the remaining portions of the award are automatically distributed to the other participant who has received within the predetermined time the largest fraction of the award.

9. A server according to claim 1, further operable to:

store tools for use by a presenter for controlling the award to the other participants, wherein the distribution of the portions of the award is varied over the course of a development of the suggested solutions for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem.

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10. A server according to claim 9, wherein the other participants are viewers of a television broadcast relating to the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions

and the presenter is a television presenter for the television broadcast.

11. A server according to claim 9, where the presenter  
5 is selected by the other participants.

12. A server according to claim 1, wherein the other participants are anonymous.

10 13. A server according to claim 2, the tools further adapted to block the further development of a selected suggested solution.

15 14. A server according to claim 2, the tools further adapted to allow the first participant to select one of the suggested solutions and control the discussion and distribution of the portions of the award in the context of the selected suggested solution.

20 15. A server according to claim 1, wherein the formulation of the problem is related to the improvement of company processes.

16. A server according to claim 1 further operable to:  
receive a selection of at least one competent  
authority from the other participants on the basis of  
suggested solutions delivered by the at least one competent  
5 authority via the network; and

facilitate a private problem resolution discussion  
between a client and the selected at least one competent  
authority.

10 17. A server according to claim 16, wherein the client  
is the first participant.

18. A server according to claim 16 wherein the first  
participant is an employee of the client.

15 19. A server according to claim 16, wherein the at  
least one competent authority is preselected before the  
formulation of the problem is received by the server.

20 20. A server according to claim 16, further operable  
to:

provide a negotiation forum for the at least one  
competent authority and the client to negotiate a level of

award to be awarded to the at least one competent authority  
for the suggested solution.

21. A server according to claim 4, further operable to  
thread the discussions.

22. A server according to claim 1, wherein the first  
participant authorizes the level of the amount of each  
portion of the award before the other participants send the  
suggested solutions, thereby finalizing the distribution of  
the portions of the award.

23. A terminal on a network, the terminal operable to:  
accept from a first participant a formulation of a  
problem to be solved;

place the formulation of the problem to be solved  
onto the network;

send onto the network from a plurality of other  
participants suggested solutions to the problem; and

receive off of the network a selection of tools for  
controlling a distribution of portions of an award to those  
participants who contribute suggested solutions to the  
problem.

24. A terminal according to claim 23, further operable to:

accept input of data relating to a discussion of the problem and the suggested solutions;

5 place the data onto the network; and  
receive and display other data relating to the discussion in real time.

25. A terminal according to claim 23, further operable to:

10 transmit anonymously the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions.

26. A terminal according to claim 23, further operable to:

15 communicatively couple to a database adapted to store the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions.

20 27. A terminal according to claim 23, further operable to accept another selection of tools for use by the other participants for controlling the distribution of the portions of the award among themselves.

28. A terminal according to claim 23, further operable to display and accept selection of tools for use by a presenter for controlling the award to the other participants, wherein the distribution of the portions of the award is varied over the course of a development of the suggested solutions for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem.

29. A terminal according to claim 23, the tools further adapted to block the further development of a selected suggested solution.

30. A terminal according to claim 23, the tools further adapted to allow the first participant to select one of the suggested solutions and control the discussion and distribution of the portions of the award in the context of the selected suggested solution.

31. A terminal according to claim 23, further operable to:

accept input of a selection of at least one competent authority from the other participants on the basis of the suggested solutions delivered by the at least one

competent authority via the network; and

facilitate a private problem resolution discussion between a client and the selected at least one competent authority.

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32. A terminal according to claim 31, further operable to:

accept input from the at least one competent authority and the client, the input relating to a negotiation of a level of award to be awarded to the at least one competent authority for the suggested solution.

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33. A system for facilitating problem solving, comprising:

a server on a network, the server operable to:  
receive from a first participant via the network a formulation of a problem to be solved,  
receive from a plurality of other participants via the network suggested solutions to the problem, and  
distribute portions of an award to those participants who contribute the suggested solutions to the problem; and

a terminal on the network, the terminal operable

to:

accept from the first participant the  
formulation of the problem to be solved,

place onto the network the formulation of the  
5 problem to be solved,

send onto the network from the plurality of  
other participants the suggested solutions to the problem,  
and

receive off of the network a selection of  
10 tools for controlling the distribution of the portions of the  
award.

34. A system according to claim 33, wherein the tools  
are further adapted to be used by the first participant for  
15 controlling the distribution of the award to the other  
participants.

35. A system according to claim 33, wherein the  
distributions of the portions of the award are varied over  
20 the course of a development of the suggested solutions for  
the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to  
the problem.

36. A system according to claim 33, wherein  
the server is further operable to:

manage a discussion of the problem and the  
suggested solutions in real time; and

5 the terminal further operable to:

accept input of data relating to the  
discussion, and

place the data onto the network.

10 37. A system according to claim 33, wherein  
the terminal further operable to:

transmit anonymously onto the network the  
formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions to the  
15 server; and

the server is further operable to:

receive the anonymous formulation of the  
problem and the suggested solutions from the network.

20 38. A system according to claim 33, further comprising:  
a database communicatively coupled to the network  
and adapted to store the formulation of the problem and the  
suggested solutions.

39. A system according to claim 33,

the server further operable to:

store other tools for use by the other  
5 participants for controlling the distribution of the portions  
of the award among themselves; and

the terminal further operable to:

display and accept selection of the other  
tools.

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40. A system according to claim 33, wherein if the  
first participant has not awarded all of the portions of the  
award to the other participants within a predetermined time,  
at least some of the remaining portions of the award are  
15 automatically distributed to the other participant who has  
received within the predetermined time the largest fraction  
of the award.

41. A system according to claim 33,

20 the server further operable to:

store tools for use by a presenter for  
controlling the award to the other participants, wherein the  
distribution of the portions of the award is varied over the

course of a development of the suggested solutions for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem; and

the terminal further operable to:

5 display tools for use by a presenter for controlling the award to the other participants.

10 42. A system according to claim 41, wherein the other participants are viewers of a television broadcast relating to the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions and the presenter is a television presenter for the television broadcast.

15 43. A system according to claim 41, where the presenter is selected by the other participants.

44. A system according to claim 33, wherein the other participants are anonymous.

20 45. A system according to claim 33, the tools further adapted to block the further development of a selected suggested solution.

46. A system according to claim 33, the tools further adapted to allow the first participant to select one of the suggested solutions and control the discussion and distribution of the portions of the award in the context of the selected suggested solution.

47. A system according to claim 33, wherein the formulation of the problem is related to the improvement of company processes.

48. A system according to claim 33,  
the server further operable to:

receive a selection of at least one competent authority from the other participants on the basis of the suggested solutions delivered by the at least one competent authority via the network; and

the terminal further operable to:

accept the selection from the other participants,

wherein the server and the terminal facilitate a private problem resolution discussion between a client and the selected at least one competent authority.

49. A system according to claim 48, wherein the client is the first participant.

50. A system according to claim 48 wherein the first participant is an employee of the client.

51. A system according to claim 48, wherein the at least one competent authority is preselected before the formulation of the problem is received by the server.

52. A system according to claim 48,  
the server further operable to:

provide a negotiation forum for the at least one competent authority and the client to negotiate a level of award to be awarded to the at least one competent authority for the suggested solution; and

the terminal further operable to:

provide a user interface for the negotiation.

53. A system according to claim 36, the server further operable to thread the discussions.

54. A system according to claim 33, wherein the first

participant authorizes the level of the amount of each portion of the award before the other participants send onto the network the suggested solutions, thereby finalizing the distribution of the portions of the award.

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55. An apparatus for facilitating problem solving on a network, comprising:

means for transmitting and receiving from a first participant via the network a formulation of a problem to be solved;

means for transmitting and receiving from a plurality of other participants via the network suggested solutions to the problem;

means for distributing portions of an award to those participants who contribute the suggested solutions to the problem; and

means for controlling the distribution of the portions of the award.

20. 56. An apparatus according to claim 55, further comprising:

means for managing a discussion of the problem and the suggested solutions in real time;

means for accepting input of data relating to the discussion; and

means for placing the data onto the network.

5           57. An apparatus according to claim 55, further comprising:

means for transmitting anonymously onto the network the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions to the server; and

10           means for receiving the anonymous formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions from the network.

          58. An apparatus according to claim 55, further comprising:

15           means for storing the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions.

          59. An apparatus according to claim 55, further comprising:

20           means for storing other tools for use by the other participants for controlling the distribution of the portions of the award among themselves; and

means for displaying and receiving off of the

network a selection of the other tools.

60. An apparatus according to claim 55, further comprising:

5 means for controlling the award to the other participants, wherein the distribution of the portions of the award is varied over the course of a development of the suggested solutions for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem; and

10 means for controlling the award to the other participants by a presenter.

61. An apparatus according to claim 55, further comprising:

15 means for receiving a selection of at least one competent authority from the other participants on the basis of the suggested solutions delivered by the at least one competent authority via the network;

20 means for accepting the selection from the other participants; and

means for facilitating a private problem resolution discussion between a client and the selected at least one competent authority.

62. An apparatus according to claim 61, further comprising:

means for providing a negotiation forum for the at least one competent authority and the client to negotiate a level of award to be awarded to the at least one competent authority for the suggested solution; and

means for providing a forum for the negotiation.

63. An apparatus according to claim 56, further comprising:

means for threading the discussions.

64. An apparatus according to claim 55, further comprising:

means for authorizing the level of the amount of each portion of the award before the other participants send onto the network the suggested solutions.

65. A method of facilitating problem solving over a network, comprising the steps of:

transmitting and receiving a formulation of a problem via the network from a first participant;

transmitting and receiving from a plurality of

other participants via the network suggested solutions to the problem;

distributing portions of an award to those participants who contribute the suggested solutions to the problem;

controlling with tools the distribution of the portions of the award.

66. A method according to claim 65, further comprising the step of:

varying the distributions of the portions of the award over the course of a development of the suggested solutions for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem.

67. A method according to claim 65, further comprising the step of:

managing a discussion of the problem and the suggested solutions in real time.

68. A method according to claim 65, wherein transmitting anonymously onto the network the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions to the

server; and

receiving the anonymous formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions from the network.

5           69. A method according to claim 65, further comprising the step of:

storing the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions.

10           70. A method according to claim 65, further comprising the steps of

storing other tools for use by the other participants for controlling the distribution of the portions of the award among themselves; and

15           displaying and receiving off of the network selection of the other tools.

20           71. A method according to claim 65, wherein if the first participant has not awarded all of the portions of the award to the other participants within a predetermined time, automatically distributing at least some of the remaining portions of the award are to the other participant who has received within the predetermined time the largest fraction

of the award.

72. A method according to claim 65, further comprising the steps of:

5 storing tools for use by a presenter for controlling the award to the other participants; and

10 varying over the course of a development of the suggested solutions the distribution of the portions of the award for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem.

73. A method according to claim 41, further comprising the step of:

15 selecting the presenter by polling the other participants.

74. A method according to claim 65, further comprising the step of:

20 blocking the further development of a selected suggested solution using one of the tools.

75. A method according to claim 65, further comprising

the steps of:

selecting one of the suggested solutions; and  
controlling the discussion and distribution of the  
portions of the award in the context of the selected  
5 suggested solution.

76. A method according to claim 65, further comprising  
the steps of:

10 transmitting and receiving a selection of at least  
one competent authority from the other participants on the  
basis of the suggested solutions delivered by the at least  
one competent authority via the network; and

15 facilitating a private problem resolution  
discussion between a client and the selected at least one  
competent authority.

77. A method according to claim 76, wherein the client  
is the first participant.

20 78. A method according to claim 76 wherein the first  
participant is an employee of the client.

79. A method according to claim 76, further comprising

the step of:

preselecting the at least one competent authority before the formulation of the problem is received by the server.

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80. A method according to claim 76, further comprising the step of:

providing a negotiation forum for the at least one competent authority and the client to negotiate a level of award to be awarded to the at least one competent authority for the suggested solution.

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81. A method according to claim 67, further comprising the step of:

threading the discussions.

82. A method according to claim 65, further comprising the step of:

authorizing the level of the amount of each portion of the award before the other participants send the suggested solutions, thereby finalizing the distribution of the portions of the award.

83. Computer code executable by a microprocessor for facilitating problem solving on a network, said code comprising:

code for transmitting and receiving from a first participant via the network a formulation of a problem to be solved;

code for transmitting and receiving from a plurality of other participants via the network suggested solutions to the problem;

code for distributing portions of an award to those participants who contribute the suggested solutions to the problem; and

code for controlling the distribution of the portions of the award.

84. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for managing a discussion of the problem and the suggested solutions in real time;

code for accepting input of data relating to the discussion; and

code for placing the data onto the network.

85. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for transmitting anonymously onto the network the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions to the server; and

code for receiving off of the network the anonymous formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions.

86. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for storing the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions.

87. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for storing other tools for use by the other participants for controlling the distribution of the portions of the award among themselves; and

code for displaying and receiving off of the network selection of the other tools.

88. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for controlling the award to the other participants, wherein the distribution of the portions of the award is varied over the course of a development of the suggested solutions for the purpose of guiding the development of a final solution to the problem; and

code for controlling the award to the other participants by a presenter.

89. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for receiving a selection of at least one competent authority from the other participants on the basis of the suggested solutions delivered by the at least one competent authority via the network;

code for accepting the selection from the other participants; and

code for facilitating a private problem resolution discussion between a client and the selected at least one competent authority.

90. Computer code according to claim 89 further comprising:

code for providing a negotiation forum for the at

least one competent authority and the client to negotiate a level of award to be awarded to the at least one competent authority for the suggested solution; and

code for providing a forum for the negotiation.

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91. Computer code according to claim 84, further comprising:

code for threading the discussions.

10 92. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for storing the formulation of the problem and the suggested solutions.

15 93. A server according to claim 6, further operable to: receive from at least one visitor a quality assessment of the suggested solutions.

20 94. A server according to claim 6, further operable to: determine a quality assessment based on the portions of the award received for the respective suggested solutions.

95. A terminal according to claim 23, further operable:  
to place on the network from at least one visitor a  
quality assessment of the suggested solutions.

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96. A system according to claim 33, further operable to  
receive from at least one visitor a quality assessment of the  
suggested solutions.

10 97. A system according to claim 33, further operable  
to:

determine a quality assessment based on the  
portions of the award received for the respective suggested  
solutions.

15 98. An apparatus according to claim 55, further  
comprising:

means for receiving from at least one visitor a  
quality assessment of the suggested solutions.

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99. An apparatus according to claim 55, further  
operable to:

means for determining a quality assessment based on

the portions of the award received for the respective suggested solutions.

100. A method according to claim 65, further comprising  
5 the step of:

receiving from at least one visitor a quality assessment of the suggested solutions.

101. A method according to claim 65, further comprising  
10 the step of:

determining a quality assessment based on the portions of the award received for the respective suggested solutions.

15 102. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for receiving from at least one visitor a quality assessment of the suggested solutions.

20 103. Computer code according to claim 83, further comprising:

code for determining a quality assessment based on